



*“We have no choice left to us.”*

## \_\_\_ Sermons on the Outbreak of War, 1775 \_\_\_

As the colonies catapulted to war in spring 1775, notably after the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, American clergymen delivered impassioned sermons on justifiable war, virtuous conduct in wartime, and unvirtuous conduct as one cause of the “public calamities.” Selections from six sermons are presented here; they were delivered to militia companies, the Continental Congress, and similar audiences from May to July 1775. “As the primary literary vehicle of the times,” write literary historian Robert Ferguson, “the sermon forms a dialectic with the people’s voice and prepares more Americans for rebellion than do books and pamphlets. . . . The belief required for independence literally is born in these sermons.”<sup>1</sup>

- **REV. WILLIAM STEARNS**, *A View of the Controversy Subsisting between Great Britain and the American Colonies*, preached to the “general officers, commanders of the New England forces . . . in defense of the property and rights, sacred and civil, of AMERICANS,” Marlborough, Massachusetts, 11 May 1775.

*II Chronicles 20:11-12. Behold, how they reward us, to come to cast us out of thy possession, which thou hast given us to inherit. O our God, wilt thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that cometh against us: neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee.*

. . . on **THE EVER MEMORABLE NINETEENTH OF APRIL 1775**: new bloody scenes were opened to our view!

As for that day, let its gloominess and the shadow of death forever terrify those murd’rous souls who wantonly then spilt **OUR BRETHREN’S BLOOD!** — Who could have conceived that men of **CHRISTIAN NAME** were capable of thus putting to the blush [causing disgrace], wild savages of the desert [i.e., wilderness]?

But, however startling to our mind, the troops of Britain’s king set out upon a plundering expedition in dead of night, being skill’d in works of darkness. — At morning light, they arriv’d at **LEXINGTON, THE PORCH OF CIVIL WAR** — There accosted our innocent countrymen with the infernal, shocking name, *damn’d rebels* — there wantonly let loose the dogs of war and with malignant tongues cry’d **HAVOC!!!** — and by **ONE** fire dismantled eight dear souls and sent them murmuring to the skies! — *are these Britons?* — O our God! wilt thou not **JUDGE** them! . . .

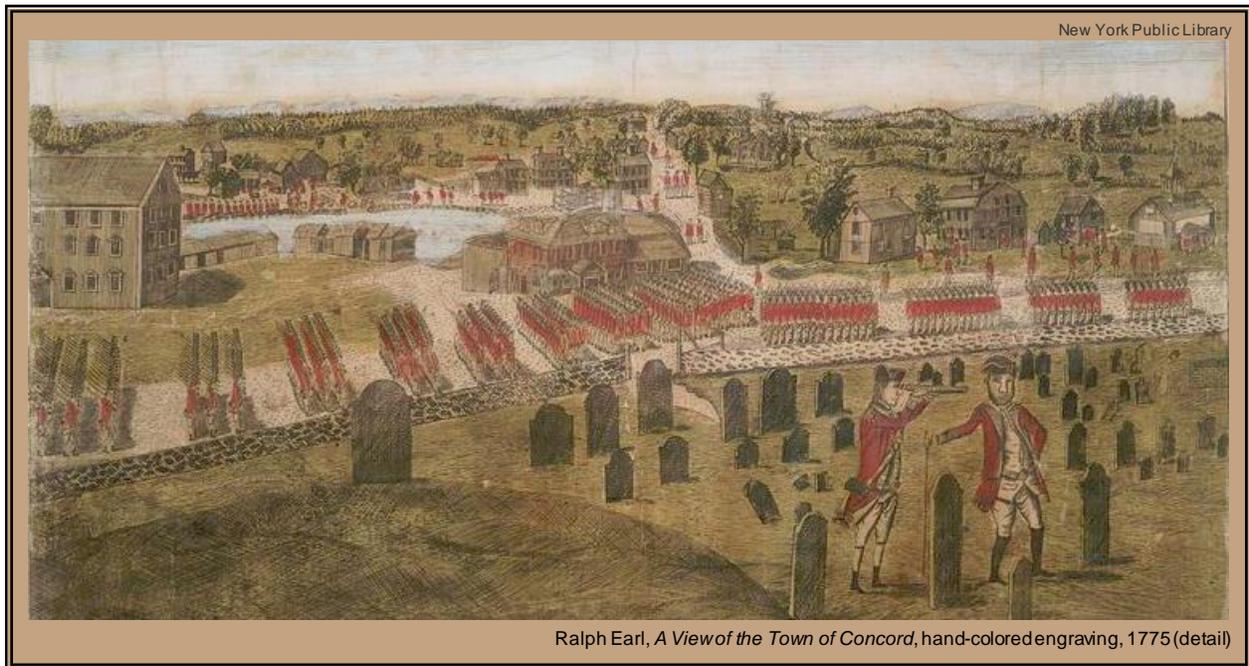
I must forbear — to go thro' the history of their conduct at CONCORD, their ravages and murders in retreat, is too painful to the human mind. — And what is now our duty? Must we now sit still and maintain peace with the butchers of our fiends? Shall we maintain it “at the expense of property, liberty and life, and all that is dear”? God forbid! If ever there was a call in providence to take the sword, there now is — Therefore *to arms!* — *to arms!* — lest that curse fall upon us which fell upon the dastardly inhabitants of *Meroz* (Jud[ges]. 5:23): “Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord; curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”

We trust that all whose circumstances will admit of it [allow it], will go — that none such will refuse to enlist in defense of his country. When God in his providence calls to take the sword, if any refuse to obey, Heaven’s dread artillery is levelled against him, as you may see, Jer[emiah]. 48:10: **CURSED BE HE THAT KEEPETH BACK HIS SWORD FROM BLOOD**; cursed is that sneaking coward who neglects the sinking state when called to its defense — . . .

- **REV. SAMUEL LANGDON**, president of Harvard College, *Government Corrupted by Vice and Recovered by Righteousness*, preached before the Assembly of Massachusetts Bay, Watertown, 31 May 1775.

Isaiah 1:26. *And I will restore thy Judges as at the first, and thy Counsellors as at the beginnings: afterward thou shalt be called the City of Righteousness, the faithful City.*

That ever memorable day, the nineteenth of April, is the date of an unhappy war openly begun by the Ministers<sup>2</sup> of the King of Great Britain against his good subjects in this Colony, and implicitly against all the colonies. — But for what? — Because they have made a noble stand for their natural and constitutional rights, in opposition to the machinations of wicked men who are betraying their Royal Master, establishing popery<sup>3</sup> in the British dominions, and aiming to enslave and ruin the whole nation [so] that they may enrich themselves and their vile dependents with the public treasures and the spoils of America.



Ralph Earl, *A View of the Town of Concord, 1775* (detail)

<sup>2</sup> I.e., the king’s cabinet, which includes the Prime Minister (not clergymen).

<sup>3</sup> I.e., Roman Catholicism. Protestant colonists were alarmed that Britain allowed the conquered French territory of Quebec to maintain its civil law and official religion of Roman Catholicism. In addition, Britain had extended the boundaries of Quebec southward to include the Ohio River Valley, where many Americans wanted to settle. [Quebec Act of 1774]

We have used our utmost endeavors, by repeated humble petitions and remonstrances [formal protests] — by a series of unanswerable reasonings published from the Press in which the dispute has been fairly stated and the justice of our opposition clearly demonstrated — and by the mediation of some of the noblest and most faithful friends of the British constitution, who have powerfully plead our cause in Parliament — to prevent such measures as may soon reduce the body politic to a miserable, dismembered, dying trunk, though lately the terror of all Europe. But our King, as if impelled by some strange fatality, is resolved to reason with us only by the roar of his Cannon and the pointed arguments of muskets and bayonets. Because we refuse submission to the despotic power of a ministerial Parliament, our own Sovereign, to whom we have been always ready to swear true allegiance — whose authority we never meant to cast off — who might have continued happy in the cheerful obedience of as faithful subjects as any in his dominions — has given us up to the rage of his Ministers, to be seized at sea by the rapacious commanders of every little sloop of war and piratical cutter, and to be plundered and massacred by land by mercenary troops who know no distinction betwixt an enemy and a brother, between right and wrong, but only, like brutal pursuers, to hunt and seize the prey pointed out by their masters.

We must keep our eyes fixed on the supreme government of the ETERNAL KING, as directing all events, setting up or pulling down the Kings of the earth at his pleasure, suffering [allowing] the best forms of human government to degenerate and go to ruin by corruption, or restoring the decayed constitutions of kingdoms and states by reviving public virtue and religion, and granting the favorable interpositions of his providence. . . .

Into what fatal policy has the nation [Britain] been impelled by its public vices! To wage a cruel war with its own children in these colonies, only to gratify the lust of power and the demands of extravagance! May God in his great mercy recover Great Britain from this fatal infatuation, show them their errors, and give them a spirit of reformation before it is too late to avert impending destruction. May the eyes of the King be opened to see the ruinous tendency of the measures into which he has been led, and his heart inclined to treat his American Subjects with justice and clemency, instead of forcing them still farther to the last extremities! God grant some method may be found out to effect a happy reconciliation, so that the colonies may again enjoy the protection of their Sovereign, with perfect security of all their natural rights, and civil and religious liberties.

But, alas! have not the sins of America, and of New England in particular, had a hand in bringing down upon us the righteous judgments of heaven? Wherefore is all this evil come upon us? Is it not because we have forsaken the Lord? Can we say we are innocent of crimes against God? No surely; it becomes us to humble ourselves under his mighty hand, that he may exalt us in due time. However unjustly and cruelly we have been treated by man, we certainly deserve, at the hand of God, all the calamities in which we are now involved. Have we not lost much of that spirit of genuine Christianity which so remarkably appeared in our ancestors, for which God distinguished them with the signal favors of providence when they fled from tyranny and persecution into this western desert? Have we not departed from their virtues? . . . Do not our follies and iniquities testify against us? Have we not, especially in our Seaports, gone much [obscured] far into the pride and luxuries of life? Is it not a fact open to common observation that profaneness, intemperance, unchastity, the love of pleasure, fraud, avarice, and other vices are increasing among us from year to year? . . . Have our Statesmen always acted with integrity? And every Judge with impartiality, in the fear of God? In short, have all ranks of men showed regard to the divine commands and joined to promote the Redeemer's kingdom and the public welfare? . . .

If true religion is revived by means of these public calamities and again prevail among us; if it appears in our religious assemblies — in the conduct of our civil affairs — in our armies — in our families — in all our business and conversation — we may hope for the direction and blessing of the most high, while we are using our best endeavors to preserve and restore the civil government of this Colony, and defend America from slavery.

- **REV. JOHN CARMICHAEL**, *A Self-Defensive War Lawful*, preached to the militia company of Captain Ross, Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 4 June 1775.

Luke 3:14. *And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? and he said unto them, Do violence to no man, and neither accuse any falsely, and be content with your wages.*

. . . where our Lord enjoins us to love our enemies — he can't possibly mean that we should love them better than ourselves — that we should put it in the enemy's power to kill us when we had it in our power to save our own life by killing the enemy. I say this cannot be the meaning, for that exposition will thwart the original first great law of self-preservation. The meaning therefore must be that we do not cherish a spirit of hatred towards the enemies, and would be willing to be reconciled again — and would be desirous the enemy would be convinced of his evil sentiment against us, that we might be again on friendly terms — that we can be sincere in our prayer to God to bring such a desirable event to pass. . . .

I am happy that I can with a good conscience congratulate you and myself this day on the certainty we have for the justice and goodness of our cause. The angry tools of power who mislead government may call us American “rebels, who would throw off all government — would be independent and what not.” — But we can now, with great confidence, appeal to God that that is false — we desire no such things — we desire to be as we were in the beginning of the present unhappy reign — we have tried every lawful peaceable means in our power — but all in vain! . . .

. . . Therefore you can, GENTLEMEN SOLDIERS, appeal to G O D for the justice of your cause. He is the judge of all the earth and will do right; the final determination of all matters is in his righteous, holy, powerful hand. When England went to war with France and Spain in the time of last reign, they invoked the aids of the God of heaven by fasting and prayer . . . But now, when they are going to murder and butcher their own children in America that have been so obedient, useful, and affectionate — we do not hear that they ask counsel of God — but if they do not, let us ask counsel and assistance from the God of heaven — he is on our side, we hope, and if God is on our side we need not fear what man can do unto us.

- **REV. WILLIAM SMITH**, *A Sermon on the Present Situation of American Affairs*, preached to the officers of the Third Battalion of Philadelphia and the District of Southwark, Christ Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 23 June 1775.

Joshua 22:22. *The Lord God of Gods—the Lord God of Gods—He knoweth, and Israel shall know—if it be in Rebellion or in Transgression against the Lord—Save us not this Day.*

Although, in the beginning of this great contest, we [clergymen] thought it not our duty to be forward in widening the breach or spreading discontent, although it be our fervent desire to heal the wounds of the public, and to show by our temper that we seek not to distress but to give the parent state an opportunity of saving themselves and saving us before it be too late; nevertheless, as we know that our civil and religious rights are linked together in one indissoluble bond, we neither have nor seek to have any interest separate from that of our country, nor can we advise a desertion of its cause. Religion and liberty must flourish or fall together in America. We pray that both may be perpetual. . . .

On the omnipotent God, therefore, thro' his blessed Son, let your strong confidence be placed, but do not vainly expect that every day will be to you a day of prosperity or triumph. The ways of providence lie through mazes, too intricate for human penetration. Mercies may often be held forth to us in the shape of sufferings, and the vicissitudes of our fortune in building up this American fabric of happiness and glory may be various and checker'd.

But let not this discourage you. Yea, rather let it animate you with a holy *fervor* — a divine *enthusiasm* — ever persuading yourselves that the cause of *virtue* and *Freedom* is the CAUSE of GOD upon earth, and that the whole theater of human nature does not exhibit a more august spectacle than a

number of Freemen, in dependence upon Heaven, mutually binding themselves to encounter every difficulty and danger in support of their native and constitutional rights, and for transmitting them holy and unviolated to their posterity [descendants].

For my part, I have long been possessed with a strong and even enthusiastic persuasion that Heaven has great and gracious purposes towards this continent, which no human power or human device shall be able finally to frustrate. Illiberal or mistaken plans of policy may distress us for a while, and perhaps sorely check our growth, but if we maintain our own virtue, if we cultivate the spirit of Liberty among our children, if we guard against the snares of luxury, venality and corruption, the GENIUS of AMERICA will still rise triumphant, and that with a power at last too mighty for opposition. This country *will be free* — nay, for ages to come, a chosen feat of *Freedom, Arts, and heavenly Knowledge*, which are now either drooping or dead in most countries of the old world.

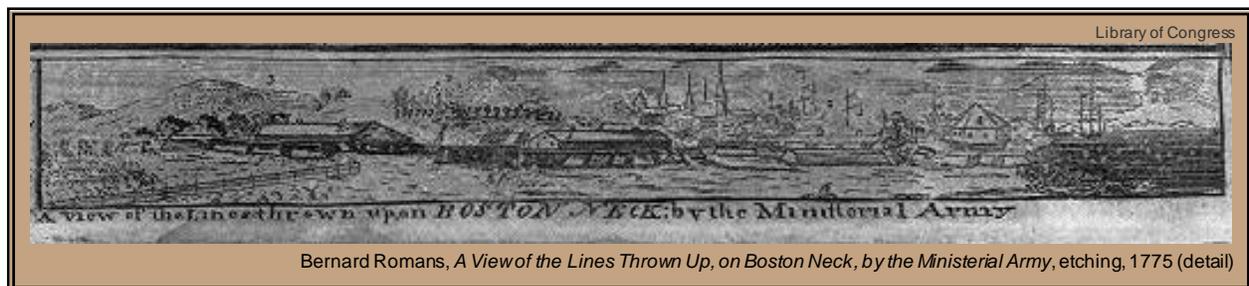
- **REV. DAVID JONES**, *Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless*, preached on the day of prayer and fasting called by the Continental Congress, Great Valley Baptist Church, Tredyffryn, Pennsylvania, 20 July 1775.

Nehemiah 4:14. *And I looked and rose up, and said unto the nobles and to the rulers and to the rest of the people, be not ye afraid of them: Remember the LORD, which is great and terrible, and fight for your brethren, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your houses.*

. . . Alas! alas! that ever there was occasion of even a defensive war: but occasion there has been and occasion there now is. — The reason why a defensive war seems so awful to good people is they esteem it to be some kind of murder, but this is a very great mistake, for it is no more murder than a legal process against a criminal. The end is the same, the mode is different. In some cases it is the only mode left to obtain justice. And surely that religion is not from heaven which is against justice on earth. . . .

. . . Suppose a villain was to rob you of a valuable sum of money and thereby expose you and your family to distress and poverty. Would you not think it your duty to prosecute such a public offender? Yes, without doubt, or else you could not be a friend to the innocent part of mankind. But suppose he not only robs you but, in a daring manner in your presence, murders your only son, will you not think that blood calls aloud for punishment? Surely both reason and revelation will justify you in seeking for justice in that mode by which it can be obtained. The present case is only too familiar — by an arbitrary act all the families that depended on the Newfoundland fishery<sup>4</sup> are abandoned to distress and poverty, and the blood of numbers spilt already without a cause. Surely it is consistent with the purest religion to seek for justice. Consider the case in this point of view, and he that is not clear in conscience to gird on his sword, if he would act consistently, must never sit on a jury to condemn a criminal. . . .

We have no choice left to us but to submit to absolute slavery and despotism, or as freemen to stand in our own defense and endeavor a noble resistance. Matters are at last brought to this deplorable extremity. — Every reasonable method of reconciliation has been tried in vain. Our



<sup>4</sup> In response to the colonial boycott of British goods, Britain prohibited New England colonists from fishing in the north Atlantic, and, two weeks later, extended the ban to Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. [New England Restraining Acts, 30 March & 13 April 1775]

addresses to our king have been treated with neglect or contempt. It is true that a plan of accommodation has been proposed by [British] administration,<sup>5</sup> but they are men of more sense than to think it could be accepted. It could be proposed for no other purpose than to deceive England into an opinion that we did not desire reconciliation. What was the substance for this pretended plan? In short, this — that we should give them as much money as they were pleased to ask, and we might raise it in our own mode. . . Now therefore let us join, and fight for our brethren. Remember our Congress is in imminent danger. It is composed of men of equal characters and fortunes of most, if not superior to any in North America. — These worthy gentlemen have ventured all in the cause of liberty for our sakes. . . if we do not stand by them, even unto death, we should be guilty of the basest ingratitude, and entail on ourselves everlasting infamy. . . Oh! remember if you submit to arbitrary measures, you will entail on your sons despotic power. Your sons and your daughters must be strangers to the comforts of liberty. They will be considered like beasts of burden, only made for their *masters' use*. If the groans and cries of posterity in oppression can be any argument, come now, my noble countrymen, fight for your sons and your daughters.

■ **REV. JACOB DUCHÉ,**<sup>6</sup> *The American Vine*, preached before the Continental Congress on the national day of fasting and prayer, Christ Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 20 July 1775.

*Psalm 80: 14. Return, we beseech thee, O God of Hosts! Look down from heaven, and behold and visit this vine!*

Here then our present calamities commence. Our MORNING JOYS are past — and a NIGHT OF HEAVINESS succeeds [follows] — The HEDGES of LIBERTY, by which we hoped our VINEYARD was secured are BROKEN DOWN, and THEY THAT PASS BY THE WAY ARE seeking to PLUCK OUR GRAPES.

'Tis not indeed THE WILD BOAR OUT OF THE WOOD, or THE WILD BEAST OF THE FIELD, that are ready to WASTE AND DEVOUR IT. 'Tis not now a foreign enemy or the savages of our own wilderness that have made the cruel and unrighteous assault — But it is even thou, BRITAIN, that with merciless and unhallowed hands wouldst cut down and destroy this BRANCH of thine own VINE, the very BRANCH which Providence HATH MADE STRONG even FOR THYSELF! . . .

ALAS! my brethren, have we not rather been so far carried away by the stream of prosperity as to be forgetful of the source from whence it was derived? So elevated by the prospect which peace and a successful commerce have opened to us, as to neglect those impressions of goodness which former afflictions had left upon our hearts? Have not luxury and vice, the common attendants of wealth and grandeur, too soon made their appearance amongst us, and begun to spread a dangerous infection through our hitherto healthy and thriving state? Amid the hurry and tumult of the passions, hath not conscience fallen asleep? Hath not a false security gained ground? And a worldly spirit too generally prevailed? . . .

Go on, ye chosen band of Christian Patriots! Testify to the world, by your example as well as by your counsels, that ye are equally the foes of VICE and of SLAVERY — Banish the Siren LUXURY with all her train of fascinating pleasures, idle dissipation, and expensive amusements from our borders. Call upon honest industry, sober frugality, simplicity of manners, plain hospitality and Christian benevolence to throw down the usurpers and take possession of their seats. Recommend every species of reformation that will have a tendency to promote the glory of GOD, the interest of the Gospel of JESUS, and all those private and public virtues upon the basis of which alone the superstructure of true Liberty can be erected.

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<sup>5</sup> In March 1775, the House of Commons had adopted a plan of reconciliation proposed by the prime minister, Lord North, whereby colonial legislatures would enact taxes for Britain at the direction of Britain, instead of taxes being imposed directly by Britain. The plan was rejected by most Americans as punitive and repressive — a continuation of taxation without representation in Parliament.

<sup>6</sup> Anglican clergyman, first chaplain of the Continental Congress; later convicted of treason against the U.S. for urging George Washington to negotiate peace with the British in 1777.